

4 THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMA OF ENGLAND

audience, the managers enlarged their theatres to such a size that only great productions could be staged in them. Meanwhile the minor theatres were growing to great popularity. These theatres had developed from the amusement taverns of the eighteenth century, in the East End and in the outskirts, from Vauxhall and Marylebone Gardens, from Astleys and the Surrey Gardens. As their patronage grew they were improved; the Olympic and the Adelphi of the early nineteenth century were as well appointed as the patent theatres. At first these theatres limited themselves to concerts, pantomimes, burlettas, and animal shows. The next step is the exchange of entertainments between the two classes of houses, the patent theatres borrowing the burlettas and animal shows of the minors and presenting them between the acts of their legitimate plays, and the minors in retaliation presenting Shakespeare and high comedy.

Under such conditions the protected theatre sank lower, and the popular theatre improved in standing. Though working under great handicaps the minor theatres managed to supply some good productions, to produce some good actors and many playwrights. The patent theatres were impoverished by legal battles and large productions. The most serious result of the situation was that it was a breeder of chaos. Between the spectacular drama of the patent theatres and the new domestic strains of the better minors, the true legitimate play fell to the ground. The business of the theatre was involved in subterfuges and jealousies. There was destroyed the respect the citizens should

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THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMA SERIES

Edited by Richard Burton

THE
CONTEMPORARY DRAMA
OF ENGLAND

BY
THOMAS H. DICKINSON

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THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMA OF ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY VICTORIAN THEATRE

It has been the fate of the theatre that gave to the world the first dramatist of modern times to rest always under the imputation of failure. Sidney, Addison, and Goldsmith, separate in time, are one in deploring the low state of the theatre. When we come into the nineteenth century we find Byron, surveying the nonsense, the puns, the mummeries of the German schools of English drama, exclaiming :

Who but must mourn, while these are all the rage
The degradation of our vaunted stage.

A score of years later, in 1829, Carlyle writes, "Nay, do not we English hear daily, for the last twenty years, that the Drama is dead, or in a state of suspended animation; and are not medical men sitting on the case, and propounding their remedial appliances, weekly, monthly, quarterly, to no manner of purpose?"

From Carlyle's time to our own the English theatre has existed under a universal censure. And yet the theatre has been as active as any other institution of the nation. The year that brought Victoria to the throne brought Macready into control of a company that was to stand as the last support of the poetic drama. That year saw the production of the first plays of Lytton and Robert Browning. During the reign of the great queen, Macready, Boucicault, Charles Kean, Phelps, the Bancrofts, Robertson, Gilbert, and Irving rose and made their contributions to English theatrical history. Before she passed away, Sydney Grundy, Henry Arthur Jones, and Arthur Wing Pinero had adapted to England movements that had attained a vogue on the Continent, and in social structure there had been a complete revolution in theatrical art.

The first theatrical problem to be attacked during the reign of Queen Victoria was the problem of monopoly. The monopoly of the patent houses, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, over the right to produce the English masterpieces of the stage, goes back to the re-opening of the theatres under Charles II. In 1843 there was passed the remedial act by which from this time forward all regular theatres in England were placed upon a parity before the government. This Act of 1843 was the last word in a chapter of parliamentary activity which had gone back to 1832 when Edward Bulwer-Lytton, then a new member of Parliament, had moved to raise the disabilities under which the unlicensed theatres suffered in comparison with the Drury Lane and Covent Garden and Haymarket

theatres. This chapter itself was but the concluding passage in a history covering one hundred and seventy-five years, in which more and more vigorous struggles had been made by unlicensed theatres against the monopolies of the patentees.

The situation of the theatre before the correcting Act may best be shown by distinguishing between its legal and actual status. Before 1843 only three theatres in England were legally empowered to play the legitimate national drama, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Congreve, Otway, and others of the old dramatists. These theatres were Drury Lane and Covent Garden, which existed by patent granted by Charles II at the opening of the theatres in 1662, and the Little Theatre in the Haymarket which lived under a renewable license, first granted in 1766 to Samuel Foote. These theatres were known as the majors. As they had a monopoly of legitimate plays, all other theatres, known as minors, were limited to concerts, farces, and variety entertainments. Serious efforts were made by law to distinguish between the legitimate play and the play to be produced by minors, and it was finally decreed that plays for the minors should be only those plays that had musical accompaniment.

In its main principles the law was clear enough, but facts continued to develop to make difficult the administration of the law. The patent theatres had been established by Charles II in a city of less than two hundred thousand inhabitants. By the beginning of the nineteenth century London had grown to be a city of almost a million. To meet the new demands of the